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Guest Viewpoint HHHH

In herbicide fight, the deck is stacked

By Day Owen

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Three years ago, my family moved to the country and became organic farmers. My wife, Neila, and I had long desired to live in the forest, thinking it a healthy place to raise our children. And it is healthy, except for one thing: the aerial spraying of herbicide on the clear-cuts that surround our land.

Soon after moving to this gorgeous 35 acres in the Coast Range near Triangle Lake, our neighbors began telling us horror stories about herbicide exposure. Shocked by what we were hearing, we began holding community meetings. Dozens of local folks gave heart-rending testimonies of horrible health consequences — including cancers, nervous disorders and still-births — that they attributed to long-term exposure to herbicides applied by the timber industry.

For a year we gathered testimony and invited experts to our monthly meetings. Then we began contacting various government agencies with a plea for help. We started with the Oregon Department of Forestry, and since then we have contacted every agency that has anything to do with the environment or public health.

Right off the bat, we noticed something fishy: These state and federal agencies seemed to be spokespersons for big timber and big pesticide companies. Their words seemed to come directly from industry handbooks. Not one agency was interested in interviewing the people who claim to have been harmed by the aerial spraying of herbicides; in fact, each agency took an adversarial stance toward us.

To call attention to our frustration with these agencies, we held the largest demonstration in the history of the small town of Greenleaf. To illustrate the fact that we are not your usual demonstrators but angry country folk, we called the demonstration The Pitchfork Rebellion. Many of the 70 or so who attended brought farm animals, including sheep, goats and chickens. The Pitchfork Rebellion became the name of our ongoing movement to protect the health of forest dwellers, human and nonhuman, and the health of the forests that are our home.

Because we thought it bizarre that state and federal agencies were not interested in our plight and that their language parroted Big Timber and Big Chemical literature, we launched an investigation. The results of the first year of what will be a three-year investigation — “The Pitchfork Inquiry Into the Influence of Big Business on State and Federal Agencies” — are now in. Already we have accumulated very revealing data.

One tidbit: the head of the Environmental Protection Agency for the Pacific

Northwest, Elin Miller, is a former Dow Chemical executive! This sort of rotation of industry executives between their jobs in the private sector and stints heading the very agencies that regulate those industries is now common. This practice contributes to the undue influence of big business over state and federal agencies.

The Bureau of Land Management is now planning a huge increase in the logging of old growth trees on public lands. Its Western Oregon Plan Revision, known by the appropriate acronym WOPR (pronounced "whopper"), would increase the clear-cutting of old growth by a whopping 700 percent, according to the Old Growth Legacy Campaign, if the preferred option, Alternative 2, is implemented. According to our contact with the BLM, increases in clear-cutting brings the increased use of herbicides.

Fifty percent of the forest in the Coast Range along the Highway 36 corridor is privately owned and is worked hard by Big Timber. Take a drive along this highway and you will see patch after patch of clear-cut forest. Nearly every time they clear-cut, they also apply toxic herbicides, often spraying it by air. Forest dwellers' homes are located among these clear-cuts. No legal buffer zone limits how close a timber industry helicopter can spray next to a home. The spray drifts, sometimes for miles, in the form of vapor. Thus far, efforts to create a buffer zone have been squashed by industry and its friends in Salem.

The other 50 percent of the forest in our range is BLM land. If the BLM increases clear-cutting, our exposure to herbicides will increase dramatically. This will also affect city folk: Tests have already found timber industry herbicides in drinking water. And yet, in its 1,606 page Draft Environmental Impact Statement on the WOPR, the BLM never addressed the issue of forest dwellers' increased exposure to herbicides. Nor did the agency address how the increased use of herbicides would affect endangered species or watersheds, though the law requires them to protect both.

These omissions are serious flaws, and we invite the public to write the BLM (Western Oregon Plan Revisions, P.O. Box 2965, Portland, OR 97208) and say so. Hurry, the public comment period ends Jan. 11. We also invite everyone to stand with The Pitchfork Rebellion at our demonstration against the WOPR at noon on Dec. 21 at the Federal Building in Eugene.

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Day Owen of Greenleaf is co-founder of The Pitchfork Rebellion. The group's report, "The Pitchfork Inquiry Into the Influence of Big Business on State and Federal Agencies," can be obtained by writing P.O. Box 160, Greenleaf, OR 97430.

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